

# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Most of the work that has engaged the Communications Committee during the past four years addresses a simple quandary: People value what public health agencies do, but they don't often understand the context in which they do it. They appreciate that public entities protect them from dangers they cannot control—such as communicable disease, unsafe food and water, and other environmental hazards. But they are unlikely to recognize the necessity of maintaining a complex government system, supported by research and regulatory infrastructure, to do the job.

To secure this vital connection—between widely valued public health services and the agencies that provide them—the Communications Committee during the past two years has overseen development of a range of focused activities designed to clarify and reinforce the core mission of the state's public health system: Always working for a safer and healthier Washington.

During the past two years, these activities have included a web-based public health communications “toolkit,” including resources for public health employees to use when they interact with people in their communities, on the web, and through the news media. These tools include fact sheets, a brochure, and public service advertisements that can be customized for use in a variety of settings. The website

(<http://www.doh.wa.gov/phip/communications/tools>) also provides straightforward language that public health professionals can use to explain succinctly the essential work they do in ways that people understand and value.

Training is provided for public health workers, at all levels of work, so they can describe clearly the benefits of public health services. An “e-newsletter” informs public health workers about the availability of new communication tools and how to use them.

Communication strategies should increase the consistency, frequency, and impact of messages reinforcing the credibility and accountability of the state public health system.

This effort builds largely on research conducted in 2001, which revealed broad support for the work of public health but also exposed a continuing identity problem for Washington's governmental health system: Few state residents think of public health when asked about government health programs. Instead, they associate public health with medical services and programs for low-income people. Yet when asked, they place high value on public health services, such those described in Appendix 6.

Over the next two years, the Communications Committee will direct its efforts to providing

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## Creating a Visible Presence

Public health workers are active throughout their communities on a daily basis. But the business of “prevention” is often hard to see, so the Communications Committee is exploring ways to give public health a visible presence. Public health employees are encouraged to wear articles of clothing that carry the “brand” of Washington’s public health system. They have found them to be remarkably effective at raising the profile of their work, as one employee attests:

“We use the vests and hats throughout all our programs: environmental health, communicable disease, to name just two. They were very helpful during our flood effort last winter. When you are one of several agencies at the emergency operations center, walking around a flooded area, giving tetanus shots, etc., it is important for people to know that it’s us out there doing public health work.”

—Corinne Story, Environmental Health Director,  
Skagit County Public Health Department



## When They Know What It Is, They Support It

As part of the initial research into communications strategies, the Communications Committee asked Washington residents what came to mind when they were asked about “public health.” Their responses revealed a generally poor understanding. But once people were informed of the services public health provided, they indicated strong support and enthusiasm. Among typical responses were:

“If public health doesn’t do it, who will?”

“It made me think of Hanford. I expect someone to be responsible for our health and safety and issues like that.”

Among people who have worked with public health agencies directly, such as elected officials, we found both solid understanding and strong support:

“Public health is not an optional program. It’s a fundamental issue of government, no matter what your politics.”

“Investigation of communicable disease is undervalued because there are so few of them. But there are so few of them because the investigation work is well done.”

“Public health is data-based and can document health outcomes. No other government enterprise is as clearly focused on demonstrable outcomes.”

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public health leaders with advanced communications training so they become familiar with better ways to communicate the value of public health and become more available to and accountable with their communities and the news media. A new approach will be to share

some of the stories generated across Washington State every day, to illustrate both the routine and creative ways the state public health workforce works to keep residents healthy and safe.

## Recommendations for 2005-07

1. Conduct advanced workforce training to strengthen understanding of public health.

The committee will conduct a round of advanced communications training to develop workforce skills in communicating the value and benefit of public health through the media, community organizations, and service groups. They will begin the series with top management in public health agencies.

2. Adopt a set of communication strategies that will achieve broader understanding of public health goals.

The public will gain a greater understanding of public health services if all agencies put forward a clear and consistent message about what public health does, how it serves and protects people, and how it informs them about how they can participate in public health efforts.

3. Collect and tell public health “stories” that illustrate how public health affects everyone who lives in or visits Washington.

Stories provide the most effective way to communicate a memorable message. Public health workers have many interesting, even dramatic, stories to tell that illustrate how public health is “always working for a safer and healthier community.” Collecting and sharing written stories will be helpful in achieving a broader public understanding.

4. Conduct a statewide media event to increase public understanding.

Beginning with the series of five communications workshops from January through March 2005, the committee will organize statewide participation in a coordinated public health “event” to engage the media in increasing public understanding of public health services and the agencies that deliver them. This event could take place during Public Health Week, in early April.